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AUTHOR Brock, Mark N.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the benefits to three practicing teachers of the experience of being observed by preservice teacher trainees. Information was drawn from teacher journal entries concerning this experience, observations by the student teachers, and conversation among teachers and between teachers and preservice observers. Specifically, the investigation considered: (1) how the presence of student observers affected teaching behavior and decision-making; (2) teachers' discoveries about their own approaches to teaching through this experience; and (3) how being observed affected teachers' views of themselves as language teachers. The teachers being observed were instructors of English for special purposes and English for academic purposes in a Hong Kong higher education institution. Results are discussed and illustrated by teacher comments. Teachers noted both benefits and limitations to learning from observation by student teachers. It is concluded that for teachers to take advantages of student observation as a tool for their own professional development, some observation tasks should require documentation of causal relationships in classroom events; teachers should help develop some of the observation protocols; teachers should keep journals of the experience; discussion among colleagues also being observed should be promoted; observers be discouraged from making evaluative comments; followup discussion between teacher and observer be included. (MSE)

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Observation from the Other Side

Mark N. Brock
Bartholomew S. K. Yu
Selina Tam

Department of English
City Polytechnic of Hong Kong
83 Tat Chee Avenue
Kowloon, HONG KONG
E-Mail: ENMARK@CPHKVX.BITNET

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Introduction

In most ESL teacher education programs observation of experienced teachers serves an important role in the education of pre-service student teachers. Structured observation (usually guided through the use of observation protocols) provides pre-service student teachers the opportunity to systematically observe some of the various components that make up the complexity of the classroom teaching event. The most common of these include guided observation of (1) classroom management (including the structuring of tasks, rules that govern the class, and dealing with problem students); (2) teacher-student and student-student interaction (including the amount and types of interaction and turn-taking patterns); (3) grouping (including methods used in arranging groups and the relationship of grouping to instructional goals); (4) structuring (including the opening and closing of lessons and the relationship of activities); (5) tasks (including the kinds of tasks, their demands on students, pacing and time given over to tasks, and teacher feedback on tasks); and (6) teaching resources (including the use of materials and teaching aids). Through guided observation of these and other components of the classroom teaching event, pre-service student teachers can develop their own knowledge of classroom teaching and come to recognize and even possibly alter some of their own views of teaching.

While there is a large body of research documenting the benefits of student observation for pre-service student teachers, there has been very little written about the

possibility of practising teachers benefitting from the experience of being observed by pre-service student teachers. In this paper we will discuss this possibility, document our own experiences in being observed by student teachers, and suggest ways that this experience can benefit the development of practising teachers.

Procedure

As part of the BA-TESL program at our home institution (the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong), we and other members of the English Department who teach ESP and EAP classes to students enrolled in various degree programs at the City Polytechnic are frequently observed by our pre-service BA-TESL students as part of their three-year teacher education program. In the following sections, we will document our own experiences of being observed by pre-service ESL student teachers during eight weeks of a ten-week term and consider how this experience may be used to enhance our own development as practising teachers.

Data for this paper were drawn from three sources, including teacher journals containing our reflections on the experience of being observed, observation protocols completed by the student teachers, and occasional conversation among teachers and among teachers and the student observers.

In first gathering and then analyzing these data, we examined three specific questions, including:

1. How did the presence of the student observers affect

our teaching behavior and decision-making during the class?

2. What did we discover about our own approaches to teaching through this experience of being observed by two pre-service student teachers?
3. How did being observed affect our views of ourselves as language teachers?

Effects of Student Observation

In the following section, some of the effects of the student observation on the three teachers participating in this project will be considered. Among the issues discussed will be the influence of the presence of the student observers on pedagogy and teacher decision-making; in addition, ways in which the presence of the student observers and the reading of completed observation protocols heightened the participants' awareness of some of the classroom processes evidenced in their classes will be considered.

Influence on Pedagogy and Teacher Decision-Making

The presence of an observer in the classroom, even a peer observer using non-evaluative protocols in observing, is potentially threatening to many teachers. While none of the three teachers participating in this project felt seriously threatened by the presence of the student observers in our classrooms, there was at least some sense of unease evident,

particularly at the beginning of the term during which we were observed. This unease manifested itself in some hesitation, particularly among two of the teachers, in how to proceed when specific problems presented themselves during the course of a lesson. For example, in the first week of the observation, Teacher A reflected on a sense of hesitation, growing from the presence of the student observers, in keeping students on task:

Two students from that group kept talking all the time while other students were presenting their answers or I was talking. I was definitely annoyed but I only stared at them. Normally, I would remind them to keep quiet and pay attention. But I was unsure how it would seem to the observers if I started disciplining adult students (April 6).

And again in the second week of the observation, Teacher A wrote:

I asked them to try to concentrate and that was the only attempt I made verbally to ask them to pay attention. I would have done it more if I had not had two student observers in my class.

Teacher C reflected on a similar experience in the first week of being observed:

When we first began to watch the video, a couple of students on the left of the class persisted in talking. I don't know what I would have done if the observers hadn't been there (maybe just ignored them and waited for them to stop on their own), but with the observers in the class I felt somewhat in a dilemma. What do I do? What will they think if I do something or don't do anything about this? How silly that I should feel that I have to weigh my decision just because a couple of students are in the class observing. But I did feel somewhat

paralysed or unsure or in a dilemma about what to do. I didn't, by the way, do anything (April 8).

Unlike Teachers A and C, Teacher B had previously experienced being observed, having participated in a peer observation project with other members of the Department of English at City Polytechnic. While in the first week of being observed Teacher B felt somewhat more alert or energized, as other teachers have reported in their experiences of being observed, by the second week Teacher B reported feeling "used to" the presence of the observers and reported going about his teaching as he normally would. Teacher B, however, did report some slight change in normal routine resulting from the presence of the student observers. About the second week, Teacher B wrote:

I still carried on with my class in the same way I would do normally without being observed. I must admit, however, I walked around the groups more than the other times. I had a faint intention of impressing the observers that I was a good teacher, giving the signal that my mind was not wandering at all or I was doing something else. I wanted to kind of impress them I was conscientious (April 13).

This desire to impress or to perform well in the presence of the student observers was not confined to Teacher B. For example, in the first week of the observation, Teacher C, reported being

a bit more talkative, bouncy, funny than usual . . . Is it the stage syndrome, where I feel that I'm on stage and I have to perform for the observers (judges?) (April 8)?

By week three, Teacher B reported that "the two observers did not have any intrusion on the class dynamics . . . and did not make me feel nervous at all (April 27)," while in the second week Teacher C reported less of the "'on stage' feeling that I had last week (April 15)." However, for Teacher A, the level of anxiety or "threat" did not subside as quickly. It was only near the end of the term that Teacher A could write:

I have noticed that there was a change in my attitudes towards the student observers. I have ceased to view them as a possible threat; in addition, I just cannot afford to pay attention to them anymore. I also believe that my students have ceased to be aware of their existence which I definitely am very pleased about (May 11).

Among each of the three participants in the project, there were at least a few instances in which the presence of the observers affected decisions about pedagogy made by the teachers. For example, both Teachers B and C produced more explicit, detailed lesson plans more than once during the observation period, something they normally do not do. For the first observation, Teacher B provided the observers with the written teaching plan for the lesson, even though producing a detailed written plan was not this teacher's normal procedure. Another example of how the presence of the student observers influenced teacher decision-making is seen in a decision made by Teacher C in the middle of the term.

I did something I don't always do during class today. I wrote a skeletal outline of the lesson on the board, giving students a broad overview, from the beginning, of the lesson structure. Though I have done this on

occasion, it is not my normal practice. Perhaps this illustrates what the presence of observers, even student observers who have no say over my employment, promotion, evaluation, etc., can have on a teacher. Why should I want to do this with observers in the room? I guess I just want to make explicit what is implicit in the lesson but may be overlooked by the observers. That is, of course, that there is a plan to what I'm doing. This is not unstructured madness (April 22).

Observation and Awareness Raising

One of the most common benefits claimed for observation is the heightened level of awareness about teaching patterns and behaviors it can bring to the teacher being observed. In this study this was particularly true for Teacher B, who, through reading the student observers' portfolio of observation tasks became more aware of some of the strategies this teacher used in structuring class activities. For example, in the summary written at the end of the observation period, one of the student observers reported that Teacher B used a variety of classroom management skills in structuring classroom interaction:

From the ESL classes I have observed, there are some interesting and effective strategies.

First, students working in pairs or groups is frequently found in an ESL class. Both of my cooperating teachers assigned their students work in pairs or three in order to get a task done . . . This increases the interaction among the students who can exchange opinions. Moreover, students can learn under a less tense atmosphere where they do not tackle problems alone.

The simple act, as it was described by Teacher A, of seeing "my own lesson through the eyes of an observer" can provide tremendous insight into the patterns and behaviors a

teacher employs (sometimes almost unconsciously). This can often be a positive, affirming experience, as reported above by Teacher B, who discovered through the student observations that he was using a far greater variety of task types and fulfilling a far greater number of roles in directing student activities than he had previously realized. It was also affirming for this teacher to learn that the structure of his lessons was clear to the observers, even though after the first two weeks he did not explicitly outline the structure of the lesson to the students in the class or to the observers.

Student Teacher Observation and Teacher Development:

Some Advantages, Limitations and Suggestions

In the following sections we will discuss three advantages that student observation can provide as a means of teacher development. We will also consider some limitations of student observation for teacher development and suggest ways that teachers might best use student teacher observation as a means of reflecting on their own performance in the classroom.

Some Advantages

Student observation seems to offer another possible means of teacher development, particularly as it can serve to enhance critical self-reflection. This may at first seem somewhat contradictory, as student teachers are not experienced in classroom teaching nor, in general, necessarily aware of many of the various components influencing the

classroom teaching event. On the other hand, as Wallace (1993) has noted, the routinized, unexamined behavior that most teachers automatically call upon in their daily teaching has the possibility of becoming "novel" when seen through the eyes of the student teacher. In other words, the simple act of naming or describing classroom routines can cause the practising teacher to pause, reflect, and question why it is she does what she does.

Another potential advantage to this kind of observation is that it is not as potentially threatening as peer observation or observation by the teacher's supervisor often is. A consequence of this may be that there will be little or, at least, less effect on classroom procedures and teacher and student behavior.

As student teacher observation is often longitudinal (usually taking place over the course of at least one term or semester), the observers have more opportunity to understand the general teaching pattern of the teacher being observed. This also enables the teacher to develop rapport with the observers, which can minimize the threat an observer might otherwise pose for the teacher being observed. This benefit of observation over an extended period of time may not always be feasible in peer observation due to the demands on a teacher's time, thus possibly depriving the observer (and the observed) of gaining a comprehensive view of the teacher's class performance and the strategies he or she uses in directing student learning.

A final advantage that student teacher observation brings

to the practising teacher is that student teachers may observe more from the perspective of students and this may then enable the teacher to reflect on the teaching act more from the viewpoint of the students. As student teachers usually have similar experiences and value systems as those of the students in the class which they observe, their perceptions of how the teacher structures and directs the lesson may be closer to the students' perception than, for example, that of a peer observer or supervisor who, because of his or her experiences and beliefs about teaching, may observe the teacher and the teaching act differently.

Some Limitations

There are, of course, some limitations in using student teacher observation as a tool for teacher development. First, teacher trainees may not be experienced enough to examine some of the more complex variables impacting the teaching event (for example, how the teacher's decision-making process is shaped by what transpires during a lesson) and thus may not be able to provide adequate feedback for reflection and teaching improvement. In fact, there was some disappointment expressed at various times during this project by each of the three teachers concerning the lack of depth in the observations made by the student teachers. For example, Teacher C stated that

I can't say that I find the comments of the two observers very helpful. . . I'm not really getting very much from what the students are writing. It seems . . . all they have done is write a step-by-step description of what is

going on in class. Specifically they have focused on me and what has transpired from my talking and interaction with students. The teacher no doubt is important in the classroom but there is so much else going on . . . What goes on in the classroom is so much richer than that. I think I'm disappointed that this experience of being observed has opened so little of that richness to me (May 6).

Another obvious limitation is that the primary purpose of student teacher observation is to provide teacher trainees the opportunity to observe an experienced teacher and to examine some of the ways that classroom learning activities are structured and managed. Any attempt to use the experience of being observed by a student teacher as a means of examining one's own teaching has some potential of misdirecting and distorting the intended purpose of the observation.

Some Suggestions

In order for practising teachers to take full advantage of student observation as a tool for their own development, we make the following suggestions:

1. In order to assist student teachers in observing and examining and the interactive nature of teaching, at least some observation tasks should require the observers to document the causal relationship of particular classroom events. Such an approach might enable the observer and the teacher to reflect on what led him or her to make a decision and consider its consequences within a specific context.
2. Teachers should be given the opportunity to participate in

the development of at least some of the protocols students will use in observing their classes. This will allow the teachers being observed to focus the observation, at least in part, on areas of particular interest and value to them.

3. Teachers should keep journals to record their feelings and reactions to the experience of being observed. Although teachers can and do reflect without the discipline of keeping a journal, this process is an important way of thinking about one's teaching systematically. Another possible way to enhance the observation experience is for the teacher to periodically video-tape lessons in which he or she is being observed. This will allow another angle of vision on teaching and student response to learning tasks. It also can provide a means of comparison with the student teacher's observations.

4. Any analysis of the completed observation protocols and journal entries should include discussion among a group of colleagues also being observed. The discussion can facilitate the teasing out or emergence of important issues to teachers involved in the observation. The reconstruction of classroom events through reading student teacher's observation tasks can also enable the teacher to reflect on specific classroom events and draw connections among teaching behaviors, learning activities, and student response.

5. In order to help the teacher being observed feel comfortable about the observation, it is important that

student observers avoid loading their observations with evaluative terms. In our observation project, even though the observation tasks were structured to be neutral and descriptive in nature, the student teacher observers appear at times to have been unable to distinguish evaluative from non-evaluative comments. As a result, Teacher A was irritated on one occasion when one student teacher discussed the weighting of assignments with what this teacher perceived to be an evaluative (negative) tone:

One of the observers looked at the weighting of each task and remarked that I allocated 40% to the report (i.e., 25% for the written report and 15% for the oral presentation of the report). And it was at that point that I felt a little uncomfortable because he seemed to be questioning the suitability of allocating 40% of the total assessment to the report. . . It was from then on I felt the need to justify why I design the lesson the way I do.

Any hint of negative evaluation may disrupt the level of trust and comfort between the observed and the observer, thus possibly affecting the teacher's performance. Although teachers may accept student observers into their classrooms more readily than superiors or even peers, when students challenge the teacher, this may not only damage the teacher's ego but also the possibility of the observation experience being of benefit to both the student observers and the teacher.

6. After each observation session, if time allows, we suggest a short follow-up session for discussion between the

teacher and the observer to talk about what happened during the lesson. However, it is important the discussion not be an occasion for evaluating the teacher's performance. Rather it should be a time for students to clarify, ask questions about classroom activities, and ask the teacher about decisions made and actions taken at particular times during the lesson. This can help the student understand some of the complex thinking that goes into teacher decision-making and can aid the teacher in becoming more conscious of what he or she did in class and the variables that prompted this behavior.

Conclusion

While the purpose of student observation of experienced teachers has always been primarily to aid the development of pre-service teachers, practising teachers cooperating in this effort should not overlook its potential for helping them examine their own teaching and thus, possibly, enhancing their own process of development and change. As teachers who face almost constant demands on our time, we cannot afford to pass up opportunities to improve our teaching whenever and wherever they present themselves, including the use of observation from the other side.

Reference

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